[French Canadian Textile Worker]

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COMMENTS

Henry Boucher Textile worker.

Page 2; line 19. Boucher refers to his uncle telling them “stories of the big woods” —- we need some of these stories.

Walter Snow, formerly of 54 Barrow St., N.Y.C. has much unpublished material relating to the Amer. Thread mills of [Willimantic?], Conn. Snow might release some of this to the Writers'. JCR-

Page 9. The 'Indian' story is too tall for use. Question whether four Indians would strike terror into fifty million French, or even fifty French?

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A French Canadian Textile Worker

One day, while in a reminiscent mood, Henry Boucher told me the story of his life. As I listened, it seemed to me that his story was [typical?] of the lives of present-day woolen and worsted textile workers.

Henry began, “I was born in a basement on Social Street, March 27, 1898. My parents, Henry and Marie Boucher, had emigrated from the village of St. Ours, Quebec, to Woonsocket in 1870. I had four brothers and two sisters, all of whom were born in Woonsocket, and I was the youngest member of the family. Due to an illness my mother was unable to work in the mill and the small pay that my father made did not permit our having any luxuries. During slack times in the mills we were often without many of the necessities of life. “ My father, an honest, hardworking cotton mill hand who had very little education, scarcely able to read and write, was always willing to work. After finishing his day's work in the mill he would saw cord wood into stove lengths for anyone who would employ him. For this he received one dollar a cord. We were very poor and my first recollection is of the pot of pea soup that was always simmering on the stove. This pea soup and a few slices of bread, covered with lard, formed our regular diet when work was slack. Why, I was working before I had my first taste of butter.

[“?]As soon as I was able to walk I would help my older brothers as they scoured the nearby woods for fire wood, and with bags we would walk along the railroad tracks looking for coal that had dropped from the coal-cars. At the age of seven I entered the Jesus and Marie Convent. After spending four years in this school I was promoted to the Precious Blood College. Both of these were French Parochial schools. The Precious Blood College was a grammar 2 school and here I was taught to read and write in French. One hour a day the English language was taught in this school, but as only French was spoken both in my house and in the Social district, where I lived, I was unable to speak the English language fluently. “ The one bright spot in my life, at this time, was in the / Spring, when my uncle Hector, a wood chopper who lived with us during the / Summer, arrived in Woonsocket after working all winter in the woods of Maine. He always brought presents to

us children and we eagerly awaited his arrival. Leaving the big woods with a loaf of bread and a gallon of whiskey, so that he would not starve during the long train ride, he would land in Woonsocket, march up to our house and shout, 'Hey Marie! Me I've come back for visit. What you got for drink?' My mother would answer, 'Water is the best thing for you.' Hector would burst into laughter and say, 'Those water she's only good for carry the log, not for drink. I go for get me something to drink.' So saying he would walk off in search of the nearest saloon. If he found any other woodchoppers in the saloon, we might not see him for two days. Although he drank enough whiskey to kill two ordinary men I never saw him unable to walk straight. While at our house he would pay five dollars a week for board and room and was always willing to tell us children stories of the big woods. At the close of / Summer he would leave Woonsocket and return to Maine.

“In 1912 at the age of fourteen I left school, and presenting my birth certificate to the Superintendent of Schools, asked for permission to go to work. He told me that I would have to pass a test as to my scholastic ability. Calling me into another room, he handed me a sheet of paper and a pencil and said, 'Write your name and address near the top of that paper.' This I did and apparently that was the test, for after he glanced at the paper he made 3 out my working papers without saying a word.

“My older brother found a job for me in the Card room of the Lippitt mill. My task was to keep the automatic feed of four Cards full of wool. For this work I received seven dollars a week. We worked 55 hours a week then. About an hour after I started working a man who was changing the gears on my Card turned to me and said, 'Say, kid, run down to the machine shop and get me a left-handed monkey wrench. I broke the one I had. Now make sure you bring back a left-handed wrench.' This was my first errand and I was determined to do it quickly, so I ran all the way to the machine shop. Stepping up to a machinist, I said, 'Pete, the Card fixer, wants a left-handed monkey wrench.' He looked at me and said, 'So you're after that wrench, are you? Hell, I don't know where it went. Ask that fellow over there — he might have it.' I went over to that man and repeated my request. Although he did not have the wrench he knew where it was, so he said, 'Go up to the spinning room

and ask Joe for the wrench. He has it.' Running up to the spinning room, I found Joe and asked him for the wrench. He told me that he had just let a man from the weave room take it. In this manner I chased all over the mill until I arrived in my brother's room. When I told him what I was looking for he laughed and said, 'Go back to your work. The men are fooling you. There is no such thing.' All the men started laughing when I returned to the Card room and the foreman walked over to me and said, 'You don't want to believe anything that these fellows tell you. They are like a bunch of monkeys, always thinking up fool stunts. The only thing that they never think about is their work.' From that time on I was accepted as a member in good standing, of the Card room gang.

“When I brought home my first pay I felt very important and my mother allowed me to keep fifty cents. This was more money than I ever had before, so 4 I promptly changed the fifty cent piece into nickels. How I swaggered around the Social district that night! After I had carefully looked and was sure that neither my older brothers nor my father was inside I entered a saloon, strode to the bar and ordered beer. The bartender, who was talking to a customer, did not glance at me but drew the glass of beer. When he put the glass of beer on the bar he looked at me, started laughing, and said, 'Say, Sonny, who do you want this beer for?' I said, 'I'm a working man and I drink beer.' The bartender replied, 'Not if I know it. Run along now and come back in a couple of years.' As I retreated toward the door the bartender asked his customers if any of them knew me. One of them answered, 'Sure, I know that feller, hees son of Henry Boucher. Me I think that hees going to get kick in the pants when Henry hear that hees go into saloon.' At this answer all of the men at the bar started laughing and I found myself with plenty to worry about, for I knew that when my father heard of me going into a saloon he would be angry. Sure enough, two days later my father came home in a rage and said, 'Henry you are a big feller now. Just because you work you tink that you can get drunk. Well, me I tell you that if I'm find you in saloon I'm kick you all de way home.'

“But in spite of this I was determined to be a man and as all the men in the Card room chewed tobacco I bought a plug and tried chewing. It has a terrible taste but I kept on

chewing. Soon I swallowed some of the tobacco. Immediately my stomach started to turn over and colored lights seemed to flash before my eyes. I was sick, very sick, and I sat on the floor groaning and wishing that chewing tobacco had never been invented. The second-hand, seeing me sitting on the floor, ran over to me and asked, 'What is the matter? Are you sick?' The other men ran over to me, but when they saw the tobacco juice, 5 that had started to dribble from the corner of my mouth, they knew why I was sick and their laughter was long and loud. Knowing that I would soon recover they returned to their work, leaving me sitting on the floor. For weeks afterward, whenever a man came near me he would hold a plug of tobacco in front of my face and offer me a chew. Upon my refusing, the man would grin and say 'You'll never be a man until you are able to chew tobacco.'

“The work was not hard and I enjoyed the companionship of the men in the Card room. After I had worked there for a few months I was given a better job, tending the finishers, and another young lad was hired to do my job. Then I had the pleasure of seeing some one else being the butt of all the jokes that the men played upon a newcomer. In the mills at that time working conditions were not as strict as they are now. A man had a lot of time to himself, there was very little piecework, and the young men were continually playing tricks on each other.

“One of these tricks caused my discharge. One morning a fellow worker sneaked up behind me and hit me with a bunch of oily waste. Then I looked around I saw the fellow, who had thrown the waste, enter the washroom. Looking around the Card room I saw that the foreman was in his office, so I grabbed one of the firepails hanging on the wall, carried it to a position in front of the washroom door and waited there for the fellow to step out. The door started to open. I lifted the pail, and as the door swung wide I threw the water into the opening. I stood there laughing, holding the empty pail, waiting to see how my fellow worker liked his bath when to my amazement through the door came the Superintendent. He was drenched from head to foot. Swearing and vowing that he would have revenge upon whoever threw the water, the Superintendent's glance fell upon me. I

was standing there with a 6 frightened look upon my face. The Superintendent strode over to me and roared, 'Did you throw that water?' I was unable to speak and could only nod Yes. The Superintendent then said, 'This is a hell of a room. You're fired. I should fire the whole crew. Get out of here before I lose my temper.' He then strode down the room, still muttering, to let the foreman know just what he thought of the discipline in the Card room. I took off my overalls, went to the office and received my pay. When I arrived home and told my father what had happened I received another lecture from him.

“I then went in search of a job every morning and landed one, as a clerk in a grocery store, within a week. The grocer was a deacon of a church and a very pious man, but he did not let his religious activities interfere with his method of doing business. During my first day's work he called me aside and said, 'Henry, when you refill the sugar barrel I want you to put in one pound of this white sand to every twenty pounds of sugar. In this store the tobacco becomes too dry and loses weight so one of your duties is to add water to the tobacco. Make sure that you keep it damp. And when you are weighing meat be sure that you have your thumb on the scales. I am operating on such a close margin that I have to do these things in order to make a profit.' My hours of labor were long and the pay was but five dollars a week during the eighteen months that I worked for this public spirited grocer.

“Throughout 1913 and the first part of 1914 the mills were very slack and the family had to live on my pay as my brothers and my father were without work most of the time. Although the family could not live on five dollars a week, the storekeepers of that period would allow a responsible family to run a bill and when the mills started in September, 1914, it seemed as if 7 my father owed money to every one in the city. With the mills running steadily my father, by allowing the family only the scantiest living was able to pay most of the back bills within a few months.

“I now left the grocery store and went to work as doffer in the Spinning room of the White mill. As this was a worsted mill, nearly all of the help in the Spinning room were girls and women. After being employed here for a short while I found that it would be impossible for

any girl or boy, working here, to remain innocent of the facts of life, as sex was almost the only topic of conversation in the spinning room.

“I did not work in the White mill very long. My brother found me a job as filling carrier in the Dunn Worsted Company. My duties were to carry yarn, used as filling, to the weavers. As I was in the weave room most of the time I learned to weave by watching the weavers work. Many times they would ask me to tend their looms while they went to talk to a fellow worker, in another part of the room. The mill was running twenty-four hours a day, as orders were coming in from the warring European nations, and there wasn't enough experienced help to go around. After I had worked as filling carrier for eight months I was given a loom and they tried me out as a weaver. This was a swell job for a young man. Soon I was making $18 a week and after paying $8 a week at home, for board and room, I had $10 for myself. During the years 1915-1917 the mill was running day and night. The rate of pay had been raised many times until in 1917 I was making $40 a week. I was now paying $15 a week at home and had $25 a week for spending money. My father and my brothers were also making plenty of money.

“After many a family argument my father decided to buy a new suit. His Sunday suit was ten years old and the blue cloth had faded so that its color 8 was purple. But he thought that it was a sinful waste of money to buy a new suit while the cloth of the old suit held together. My mother threw away her old hat that she had had for many years. Every Spring she would replace the ribbon and the imitation flowers with new ones. On the first Sunday that my father and mother wore their new clothes they went to High Mass, as they wanted everyone to see them.

“My father urged me to save some of the money that I was making but I was having too good a time spending it. I bought myself four suits, four pairs of shoes, hats and many things that I had always wanted but could never afford, such as silk shirts, silk underwear, and a new Ford Car. While I never was a drunk, my liquor bill would be about $8 a week. After the day's work I would meet my friends in the corner saloon and there we would

play cards and talk things over. It was wonderful — from a drab and dreary existence I was now able to live as formerly only the foremen of the mill had lived. I did not have to eat pea soup, I could purchase steak. I did not have to live in a basement I could pay the rent in a residential district. No matter what I spent, another week's pay was coming. My friends would gather at the saloon and then start out for a dance or a party. You did not have to worry about your job. No matter what you did, the boss would not dare fire you. It was seldom that I went to bed before two a.m. If you went to work in the morning with a big head, or even slightly drunk, the boss would overlook it, as the mill could not obtain enough help. During this period I was able to gratify my repressed desires with one long carousal.

“In September, 1917, I was drafted for the army and the night before I left my friends held a party for me. It was a wild party with everyone drinking, telling stories and singing the French songs of Old Canada. The France Frenchmen that I knew gave me the names and addresses of either their 9 families or their friends in France. The next morning all of my family was at the Railroad Station to wave good-by to me. I was sent to Camp Dix, New Jersey and after a few weeks' training I found myself on board a boat bound for France.

“We landed at Brest and I was assigned to the 107th regiment of the 77th Division as a replacement. Then we arrived at the village, where my company was training, I was billeted in a French farm house. Being the only one in my company able to talk French I had a fine time as the other soldiers would pay me, with free drinks, to translate their desires to the inhabitants of the town. When the old French couple, whose house I was billeted in, learned that I was of French descent, nothing that they had was too good for me. They introduced me to all the inhabitants and to the Mayor of the town. In the French newspapers there was an article that stated, 'A million wild Indians were coming from America to fight the Germans.' All of the French people asked me if they had landed, what they looked like, would they murder the French people if they were let loose and would they scalp the Germans. The Frenchmen's knowledge of Indians was gained from the Wild West movies that they had seen. The soldiers of my company thought that this

was too good an opportunity to miss so four of them painted their faces, fashioned some Indian suits out of old clothes and with a blanket wrapped around them paid a visit to the Mayor of the town. The Mayor greeted them formally and held a party in his house with the 'Indians' as the guests of honor. All of the inhabitants of the town attended the party. Whatever the 'Indians' wanted was given them, for the French people had seen, at the movies, the massacre that ensued when Indians go on the warpath.

“Shortly after this my regiment was ordered up to the lines, where we participated in several battles. Although many of my friends were killed 10 I came through without a scratch. When I was demobilized, at the end of the war, I returned to Woonsocket.

“After loafing around for about a week I went over to the Dunn [Worsted?] Co. to see if I could have my old job back, but I was told that the mill was running on short time. Unable to obtain employment in the textile mills I went to work in the Woonsocket Rubber Co. as a trucker. This job only paid $22 but I was compensated in another way, for while working here I met the girl that later became my wife. In 1922 the mills started running full time and I was able to obtain employment as a weaver, in the Montrose mill. This mill was making a very high grade worsted cloth and i weaver was able to make $35 a week.

“Shortly after I started working in the Montrose mill I married Alice Deschamps, the French Canadian girl that I had met while working in the Woonsocket Rubber Co. I was 24 years old and Alice was 20. Two nights before the wedding my friends held a stag party for me. They hired a hall and about one hundred men gathered there to celebrate my marriage. Father Didion, my pastor, who knew everything that happened in the parish, arrived at the hall early and to the consideration of the other guests he sat down and started eating. After the meal he made a short speech as to the duties of a married man. He then proposed a toast to the young couple and showed that he was the soul of discretion by announcing that it was getting late and he had some duties to attend to at the parish house. Then he left, everyone in the hall felt relieved, as most of the acts that they had hired, / in Boston ,

were of the 'strip-tease' type and it was not possibl possible to have them performed while good Father was in the hall.

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“There is one event that I'll always remember, and that is my wedding. I had on a morning suit, the first that I had [every?] ever worn. It was hired for the day. All of our friends were at the church and the breakfast at the bride's house was a gay affair. We had a bartender to handle the liquor and a dance orchestra to play for the dancing. Late in the afternoon we left for New York City. I had been there before but my wife Alice had never seen New York. What fun we had for the next two weeks exploring the city, and what stories we had to tell our friends when we returned!

“After the honeymoon we returned to our jobs, I to the mill and Alice to her job in the Rubber shop where she made $24 a week. After we had settled down I became ambitious for the first time in my life. We talked it over and figured out a budget by which we could save $20 every week. We planned to save this amount every week for the next twenty years, by which time we would be worth $20,000. Then we intended to buy a farm and spend the rest of our life in peace and quiet, never again to worry about a job, slack times, or the necessity to answer the mill bell. It was a beautiful dream and we tried to make it a reality. On the second anniversary of our marriage we had $2,500 in the bank, $500 more than we had planned on. We were living in a comfortable and modern home in a residential district. The furniture was paid for and we did not owe a cent to anyone. We were also the proud possessors of a Ford car that was nearly paid for.

“That night we were very happy and proud of what we had accomplished in the two years since our marriage. Our friends gathered at our home and we held a party. It was a gay party. Some of the time was spent in singing old songs and telling stories, then all gathered around and started telling of the hardships that each of us went through in our childhood — how we had to wear our older brother's cast-off clothing that was go faded and patched 12 that you could not tell what the original color was; how each of us longed

for Sunday, as that was the only day on which we had meat for dinner. The life that we had lived as children was, in 1924, laughable, for all of us knew that conditions could never be like that again. How could we foresee the future? Everyone at the party was well clothed, well nourished, happy, willing to work for what they desired and were working at good pay. Each one was planning to possess more of the necessities and the luxuries of life. One wanted an electric refrigerator, another a new car, some were saving so that they might purchase a home or a business.

“During our third year of married life in 1925, a son was born to us. He was named Henry in honor of my father-in-law. A few months previous to the birth of our son, my wife gave up her job in the factory, but as I had had a promotion to 'warp-starter' and was making $50 a week we were able to continue saving $20 every week. The next year we became the parents of a daughter, whom we named Marie. From this time on I was unable to save $20 a week but put in the bank some money every payday. After the birth of our second son, Homer, in 1927, my wife became ill and needed medical attention. Because of this I was unable to save any money, for the Doctor's bills used up whatever surplus money we had.

“In 1928 work in the mills began to slacken and I was laid off. After being [out?] of work for two months I secured employment in the Saranac mill as a weaver. At this job I received $40 a week, but I believed that in a short time I would again find employment as warp-starter. The next year conditions were worse and I was without work for three months. My wife and I were not worried about the future, as we believed that the mills would be slack for only a short period, as they were in 1921. So we lived on what I 13 made and did not touch the $3,500 that we had in the bank. I was without work for six months in 1930 and we were forced to use some of the money that we had saved. But I was in a better position than most of my friends who were buying houses and were unable to meet their payments. My brother Peter was caught in this condition and as the bank was going to foreclose on his house I loaned him $500. I knew that he, a cutter in the Rubber Shop, making $70 a week, would be able to repay me as soon as his work picked up. Then without warning

the Rubber Shop closed down and moved out of the city, throwing 1,500 people out of work. The next year, 1931, the bottom dropped out of everything and we were forced to use up most of our savings. In only one way, was I fortunate, and that was that I had no more Doctor's bills to pay, as my wife was well again. The bank foreclosed on my brother's house and my $500 was gone. My father died in July and after the funeral my mother came to live with me. She did not live long after my father but died in October, 1931. As neither my father nor mother believed in life insurance, all of their children contributed to the cost of the funerals. I was unable to find work and spent the entire year hanging around the streets. By the end of 1931 my bank balance was less than $500 and going down rapidly.

“In September, 1932 I reached the end of my resources. I was desperate, with a wife and three children to support I was unable to find work of any kind. All of my friends were in the same predicament. Finally I had to go on relief, and what a relief that was! I shall always remember my experience while trying to get relief from the city. I went down to City Hall and registered at the Poor Department. After looking me up they gave me a pass to obtain food. But in order to receive the food I had to stand in line on Main Street with every passerby staring at me.

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“One day I stood in a line that blocked one side of Main Street for four hours before I received a small bag of flour and two pounds of dried peas. Of course my family was unable to live on what I received from the Poor Department so I was continually moving to cheaper tenements until at last I was living in a basement on Social Street. The same type of tenement that I was born in. The home that I had taken such pride in was broken up and the fine furniture that my wife and I had worked for we had to sell to second-hand furniture dealers. It is not correct to say that I sold the furniture because the money that I received for it was so little that it was almost equivalent to giving it away. But my children had to have food and clothing. The rent had to be paid and coal to be [?] bought.

Library of Congress

“There was a soup kitchen on Social Street and my son would go down there with a pail and bring home some soup. This helped out the small amount of food that I received from the Poor Department and kept my family from actual starvation. My family was very poor when I was a child and when work in the mills was slack we would not have much to eat but in Woonsocket never before was it necessary for anyone to have to go to a public Soup kitchen in order not to starve.

“In 1934 I obtained employment as a weaver in the Montrose mill. I worked steady the whole year except for a few weeks when the mill was closed by a strike. But working conditions had changed. They were as different as day and night from the working conditions of the 1920 to 1930 period. The pay had been greatly reduced and the amount of work per man had been increased. I had been making $40 a week as a weaver operating two looms. Now I am operating six looms on the same material and only making $24 a week. I am lucky that I am working on fine worsted cloth because in some mills on coarser 15 cloth, the weavers now operate from eight to twenty-four looms for $24 a week. Apparently the only thing that a textile worker can rely upon in these times is that the mill owner will never suffer lower profits as long as he can transfer the burden upon his employees.

“In 1935 I was again laid off and the money that I had made in 1934 was soon used up, then back to the relief I went. Since that time I have worked about six months in each year, and being unable to support my family when I an not working, I usually spend the rest of the year on the relief. The last place that I worked was in the Montrose as a weaver, in the Spring of 1938. I worked here for four months but I knew that it would not last forever.

“One morning I left my house and as I entered the weave shop I could sense the tension that seemed to be in the air. The looms clattered, the men moved about. The belts and pulleys whirred. A typical weave room interior. But on this Friday morning there was something lacking. No one was talking, there was no laughter. Joseph Boyce, who worked next to me, did not raise his head from his work to call a greeting, nor did he ask me how

I intended to spend the weekend, as he was wont to do. Everyone was silently working, busy with their thoughts. For about a week past there had been rumors that the work in the mill was getting slack. Only three days ago six spinners were laid off and the rumor was that eight weavers would lose their jobs this afternoon. I was, in length of service, one of the youngest weavers in the mill and I believed that I would be one of the first to be laid off. But there was nothing sure about it. Sometimes an old hand, whom the boss disliked was laid off and a newcomer kept. This uncertainty kept every weaver 16 under a strain until they knew just who was [?] to get the bounce. So they continued to work hard and silently until lunch time, for this was one day that no one wanted to make a mistake and have the foreman's attention called to him. While eating lunch the weavers could talk of nothing but who was to be laid off. While the newcomers believed that they would be the first to go, many of the old-timers remembered how they had spoiled yards of cloth and how displeased the boss had been with them. They wondered if he would remember the many times that he had bawled them out and take revenge by letting them go. So in this frame of mind the weavers started the afternoon shift.

“This afternoon the foreman of the weave room did not walk around the room as he was accustomed to do, and it was nearly the close of the afternoon before he stepped from his office. Instantly, the eyes of all the weavers were upon him, watching where he was going, and each man hoping that the foreman would not come to him with the sad news. I saw the foreman turn to a weaver and start talking to him. They talked for a few minutes while everyone in the room watched. The foreman then turned away and approached another weaver. The first weaver spread his arms out wide in a gesture and everyone then knew that the foreman was laying off help. All eyes then turned to the foreman, watching to see who was being laid off. I watched the slow progress of the foreman as he went from man to man, telling them the bad news. He was now at the next loom and I prayed that I might be spared. But it was not to be, for the foreman slowly walked over to me and said, 'You know what I have to say. I have a list of men who are to be laid off and your name is on it. They are laying off in every room of the mill and if more work don't come in the rest

of the weavers will be out next 17 week. This is no reflection upon your work, which has been good; and I'll be glad to hire you back just as soon as the work picks up.' I replied, 'Well, I guess all the fellows here are in the same boat that I'm in. All of us are broke. This will mean plenty of hardship for my family. After eating good for the past five months, the first few meals of that relief canned Corn beef is going to be hell for the kids. But thanks for your offer to rehire me when the work picks up. I'll certainly be glad too to get back to work.' The foreman then returned to his office and the weavers gathered into a group asking each other what the boss said to them. The men who were laid off now that the tension had been broken, began to joke and one said, 'Will Johnny Ryan, the Director of Public Aid be glad to see me? Like hell he will. The last time I was on relief I had to haunt him in order to get any commodities. Every time he turned around I would be at his elbow asking for something.' Another said, 'This loafing is all right in some ways but I'll always blame the last lay off for the twins my wife had.' I said, 'I wonder how long I'll have to wait for my unemployment compensation checks. The last time I had to wait ten weeks before I got the first one and then the amount was wrong.' And so for a few minutes they joked and talked of the future. They then returned to work.

“My mind was not on my looms. I was thinking of the greatly lowered standard of living that my family would have to endure while I was out of work. I thought of my new radio that I was paying one dollar a week on. That would soon be taken back by the dealer. And then there was the dreadful ordeal of informing my wife and children that I had been laid off. I knew that there would be no handiness or laughter in my home this night. How could I support my family on the six or seven dollars a week that I would receive from a relief? How long would I be without work this time? I 18 stood there thinking these gloomy thoughts, not caring how my looms ran. What did I care now if a 'smash' or dropped thread was made in the cloth? Let some one else worry about that. At bell time I made a bundle of my overalls and silently slipped out of the mill. I started walking home wishing that the road was twice as long so that I would not have to face my family so soon.

“When I reached home my wife saw by the sorrowful look upon my face that something had gone wrong and she asked, 'What is the matter Henry?' I replied, 'The same old thing. I'm laid off and don't know when I'll go back.' Across my wife's face an expression of fear flashed but she quickly rallied and said. “Well, you can't help that, so stop looking as though you were at your own wake. We have been on relief before and we're still alive so sit down and eat your supper. You'll feel better then.” I sat down at the table but could eat very little. All this time the children, seated around the table, had been listening to the conversation and looking at me with wide staring eyes. Only too well did they know what this meant, less food, no new clothes, no money to go to the movies, peeking through the window curtains when someone knocked upon the door, to see if it was a bill collector, moving to a less desirable tenement in short, misery for everyone in the family. After supper I was unable to stand the silence and gloom that seemed to settle over the house so I put on my coat and said, 'Alice, I'm going down to the corner for a minute.' My wife, knowing full well where I was going said, 'Make sure you come home sober.' So, leaving the house I hurriedly walked to 'Fats' saloon. In there, men would be talking upon every subject. There would also be jokes and laughter and for a few hours I could forget that my next pay would be the last one that I would receive for a long time.

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“The next day I applied for my unemployment compensation and because of waiting for these cheeks I was unable to go on the relief for two months. By this time I was completely broke, so for the next few months we struggled along on the six dollars a week that I received from the relief. But week by week we were going deeper in debt for rent, electricity, and many other small bills. One morning a Deputy Sheriff handed me an eviction notice and departed. And there I sat, in the kitchen, alone, forlorn and in despair. It was the morning of November 25, just one month before Christmas, and in my hand I held the notice from the court to evacuate the tenement that I occupied. This was not the first eviction notice that I had ever received. During the past ten years, the deputy Sheriffs had worn a path to my door delivering eviction notices, writs of attachment and liens

on my pay. How could I break the news to my wife, when she returned from a visit to a neighbor's house? Where could we go? When you are on relief and only receive six dollars a week it is impossible to support a family and pay rent. The landlords did not care to rent a tenement to families on relief as they could not be sure of their rent. So most of them were demanding their rent in advance. If I could find a tenement, where could I borrow the three dollars for the first week's rent? What a / Christmas was in store for my children! As I sat there alone with my thoughts the door opened and my wife walked in. Without talking I handed her the eviction notice. She knew what it was. She had seen many of them since 1930. Silently she laid it down and started to prepare dinner, each of us wondering where we could find a tenement.

“A knock on the door. We looked at each other. What more trouble was coming to us? Good news had been absent from our lives for more than ten years. My wife slowly and listlessly walked to the door and opened it.

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There stood Adrian Bonin, with a broad smile upon his face and he said, 'O boy, Henry, I have thees fine news for you. De boss wants for you to come to work tomorrow morning. Thees mill she's get the big order. We'll work all winter.' It seemed like a miracle, the house seemed brighter wide smiles appeared upon our faces. We started asking questions of Adrian. Who was the order for? What looms would I have? How does the yarn run? Which of the men were going back to work? Adrian answered as best he could and soon left. Dinner was forgotten and my wife and I were still talking in an excitable manner when our children came in for dinner. They sensed the jovial mood of my wife and myself and when they heard the news they too forgot about dinner in thinking of the happiness that this news meant. Their father was going back to work. There would be new clothes for all and toys and presents at Christmas. After the children had gone to bed Alice and I sat up talking. We planned how we would spend my first week's pay to the best advantage. By paying a little each week on the old bills we would soon be out of debt. We would not have to move now for as soon as the landlord knew that I was working he would forget about his

eviction notice. And if we needed money at Christmas we could easily borrow it from the small loan company. So in a happy frame of mind we went to bed.

“The next morning I was at the mill gates an hour before bell time. There I found all of my fellow workers and I joined in their conversation. Each asked the other what they had been doing during the lay off and what were they going to do with their first pay? There were predictions, laughingly made that 'Fat's' saloon would do a rushing business on pay night. But under all this gay jesting everyone of us knew that when the order was finished in a few months, we would again be laid off, to a tramp the streets while we collected our unemployment compensation checks and then back on relief we 21 would have to go until the mill started running full time again. We had gone through this routine many times in the past ten years and each one of us knew that he would go through it many times in the future. But that knowledge could not dim our spirits today because we knew that while the mill operated we would be able to eat what we wanted, we could dress our families and have a dollar left so that when meeting our fellow workers in 'Fat's' saloon on Saturday night each one of us could stand up to the bar and pay for a round of beers.”